# THE THIMBLE OF SEASONS

*A Tale of Magic, Family, and Forgotten Paths*

By **Jailey Hall**

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Jailey Hall asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

First edition of the ''Thread of Light'' series

“Some rifts mend with thread, others with courage — and some only with truth.”

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## Preface

Magic is not always loud. It does not always blaze in the sky or roar through the mountains. Sometimes, it hides in the quiet

turning of a thread, the soft glimmer of a frost-covered leaf, or the whispers of a forest that remembers everything. In this story, magic is fragile, fleeting, and precious—woven into the seasons themselves and into the lives of those who can sense it.

The journey you are about to take follows four young adventurers whose courage, curiosity, and connection to one another will shape not only their destinies but the balance of the world around them. Their paths are strewn with challenges, mysteries, and discoveries that test what it means to trust, to fight, and to grow. This is a story of threads—threads of family, friendship, and fate—that, when pulled together, form something stronger than

any individual could achieve alone. As you turn these pages, I invite you to walk alongside Evy, Kalliope, Etain, and Elowen, to explore a world where every season carries a secret, every shadow a lesson, and every step a chance to discover your own hidden strength.

## Introduction

In a world where the seasons themselves are fragile threads of magic, four young

adventurers are thrust together by fate, family secrets, and a mysterious artifact known as the Thimble of Seasons. Evy, a girl whose sewing magic can mend more than fabric; Kalliope, the "unexpected child" with extraordinary abilities; and the fairy-taught twins, Etain and Elowen, must navigate shifting forests, guardians of ancient knowledge, and illusions that prey on fear.

As they chase fragments of power across enchanted lands, uncovering truths about their families and the forces that shaped their destinies, they learn that strength lies not in individual talent, but in trust, courage, and unity.

## Chapter One – The Tear in the Sky

Evy Humblebrook woke to the sound of the wind talking.

Not just rustling the meadow grasses, not just teasing the wooden shutters — but talking, low and urgent, as if it had something it needed her to hear.

She lay still for a moment, blinking up at the thatched beams of her ceiling, wondering if she had simply dreamed it. Her quilt was heavy and warm, smelling faintly of lavender from last summer's harvest. The scent made her think of sunlit fields, of afternoons when she and Gran

had carried armfuls of the stuff in from the meadow, laughing when the bees insisted on following them inside.

For a moment, she considered burrowing back down, curling herself into that safe pocket of warmth. But there it was again — the soft rise and fall of a voice pressing through cloth, like a secret being whispered to the wrong side of a door.

The smell of baking bread drifted up from the kitchen below, mingled with the faint clink of crockery. Gran was awake, as always. Somewhere beneath those familiar morning sounds was that strange, urgent wind.

Evy sat up slowly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Morning light was still shy — a pale silver washing over the wall, catching on the frayed edge of her curtain. She slipped from bed, pressing bare feet to the smooth, cool planks.

Her fingers lingered on the clothes laid out the night before — a woolen skirt, apron, and her thick shawl, the one with the tiny repair she'd stitched last winter. She traced the little patch for a moment, remembering the night she had sewn it by candlelight. That had been the evening the snow fell without warning in the middle of harvest week, trapping her father in the orchard overnight. She could still recall the

ache in her hands from working so long in the dim light, and the way Gran had pretended not to notice her eyes drifting toward the dark window, waiting for the lantern glow that would mean he was coming home.

Her satchel went over her shoulder without thought; she never left home without it. Inside, the chipped mug clinked softly against her notebook and a neatly coiled length of string. She checked for the bit of charcoal she'd tucked in last week, just in case she needed to make a rubbing of something. Not that she'd had cause yet — but she liked being prepared.

She padded down the narrow stairs into the kitchen. Gran was slicing an apple into thin, precise wedges, her back to the door.

“Morning, Gran,” Evy murmured, brushing a kiss across her grandmother’s cheek.

“Mm. Bread’ll be ready soon,” Gran said without looking up. “Don’t forget to fetch the milk before the meeting.”

“I won’t,” Evy promised — though she often did.

Gran’s gaze flicked to her satchel and she made a small “hmm” sound. “Always ready to wander, aren’t you?”

“Always ready to listen,” Evy countered.

The meadow beyond their cottage was laced with mist, soft as spun wool. The air held the crispness of early spring, but something in it was… wrong. A prickle. Across the hedgerow, the neighbor’s apple tree was tipped in gold, its leaves brittle and dry as though autumn had slipped in overnight.

Evy frowned. Season-shift storms weren’t unheard of in the valley, but they were rare and usually harmless — a handful of blossoms in winter, a crisp morning in midsummer. This felt different.

She made her way toward the goat pen, her boots brushing against the wet grass. Juniper, their stubborn brown nanny goat, was standing squarely in the middle of the path.

“Oh, come on,” Evy sighed, nudging her gently.

Juniper stared back, unimpressed. Then — with the deliberate defiance only a goat could muster — she folded her legs and plopped down.

Evy groaned. “Not today, Juni. I mean it.”

The goat’s only response was a soft chew of her cud.

“If you’re going to be like this, I’ll tell the hens you’re hogging all the attention,” Evy muttered. “And you know how they gossip.”

It took three minutes, a handful of grain, and a muttered threat about being replaced with a more cooperative goat before Juniper finally shuffled aside. By the time Evy had finished milking and was swinging the pail at her side, the sun had edged higher.

She passed Mrs. Alder’s garden on the way back. The old woman was kneeling among her cabbages, shaking her head.

“Can’t keep track of the weather anymore,” she called. “Half my spring seeds are sprouting, half are freezing.”

“Maybe the seasons just like to surprise us,” Evy said, offering a smile.

Mrs. Alder snorted. “Surprises are for birthdays, not planting beds.”

She plucked a frozen cabbage leaf and let it crumble in her hand. “Mark my words, girl, when the weather starts acting strange, other things follow. Chickens stop laying. Milk sours faster. Even the bread won’t rise right.” She gave Evy a pointed look, as if she were somehow responsible.

Evy laughed politely, but her gaze kept drifting upward. The clouds moved oddly — as though being tugged from different directions at once.

The wind gusted again, sharper now. It pulled her attention toward the old orchard. And that was when she saw it.

High above the tangled branches stretched a thin, pale seam — like the sky had been stitched together and the thread had come loose. The edges shimmered, and through them swirled snow. Snow, in the middle of lambing season.

Her breath caught.

“Gran?” she called.

Gran stepped into the doorway, drying her hands on her apron. She followed Evy’s gaze, and her expression tightened.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t notice,” she murmured.

“What is it?” Evy asked.

Gran’s eyes, usually bright and full of stories, clouded. “It’s the kind of thing only someone with sharp eyes and the right hands will see. Which means it’s your task, Evy.”

From the kitchen she brought a small wooden box, its lid carved with spirals and

vines. Inside, wrapped in faded cloth, lay half of a silver thimble. Its bottom edge was jagged, as though broken from the rest.

"This is all that remains of the Thimble of Seasons," she said softly. "The rest is lost. Without it, the seams between the seasons are tearing."

Evy held the piece in her palm. It was warm — pulsing faintly, like a tiny heartbeat.

"You think I can fix it?" she asked.

Gran's mouth curved faintly, but there was no humor in it. "You've always mended what others thought beyond repair. If you don't find the missing piece, the seasons will keep

unraveling until nothing grows, nothing rests, nothing lasts."

Outside, spring blossoms shivered under autumn leaves. A flock of winter geese cut across a summer-blue patch of sky.

Somewhere deep inside, Evy felt a tug — the same one she felt whenever she thought of her real parents.

The wind whispered again, clearer this time: Find it.

She tightened her grip on the thimble, pulled her shawl closer, and stepped into the meadow.

She didn’t see — not yet — the two figures watching from the shadow of the riverside trees, their satchels already packed for a journey.

One of them leaned to the other and murmured, “She’s seen it.”

The other nodded, their gaze fixed on the silver glint in her hand.

## Chapter Two – The Weaver's Warning

By midmorning, the faint seam in the sky had almost vanished, leaving only a glimmering trace, like a whisper of silver stitched into the clouds. Yet the blending of seasons lingered stubbornly. Frost clung to the morning grass while bees lazily circled crocuses.

The air smelled of both apple blossoms and lingering woodsmoke — a combination that made Evy wrinkle her nose. She pulled her shawl tighter around her shoulders, the warmth of the broken thimble pressing against her side from inside her satchel, a tiny heartbeat she could feel even through layers of cloth.

“Where do I even start?” she murmured aloud, shifting the strap higher on her shoulder.

Her grandmother leaned on the weathered fencepost, the morning sun catching in her hair like strands of silver thread. She studied Evy with a look that was part worry, part resignation.

“If there’s one person who might know what to do, it’s Mistress Yarrow,” she said finally. “She weaves more than cloth — she weaves the year itself. The patterns of the seasons run through her like blood.”

Evy hesitated. “And what if… I can’t find the rest?” The words slipped out before she could swallow them back.

Gran’s eyes softened, but her tone was steady. “Then you’ll try anyway. Mending the impossible is

what you do best. And this—" she nodded toward the satchel "—this is work only you can take on."

A gust of wind rattled the gate latch, making both of them glance toward the orchard. Gran didn't comment, but her fingers tightened on the fencepost. "Don't let the village talk slow you down," she added. "People will say it's just weather. But you'll see more than they do — and sometimes that means walking alone."

The weight of those words followed Evy as she set off toward the village, boots crunching over frost-hardened soil.

The market square was already alive with sound and color. Merchants stacked baskets of onions, roots, and flowers on stalls patched together from mismatched

planks. Children darted between legs, squealing when a chicken escaped and flapped wildly down the lane. The air was a mix of bread baking, damp wool, and woodsmoke.

A potter was arguing with a customer about the price of mugs, each insisting the other was mistaken about what had been agreed upon last market day. A fiddler near the fountain played a tune so quick and bright it made even the grumpiest shoppers' feet tap without their permission. Evy had to step aside as a wheelbarrow of cabbages rolled past, its owner muttering about frost damage.

She passed the baker's stand just in time to see a boy — not more than seven — creeping toward a tray of warm rolls.

“Catch him, Greta!” a woman called from behind the counter.

The boy snatched a roll and bolted, but his foot caught on the uneven cobbles. He rolled once, came up with the bread still clutched triumphantly in his hands, and tore down a side alley.

Evy couldn’t help the small laugh that escaped her. Even with the seasons tangling themselves into knots, village life carried on — stubborn and noisy.

Still… the air felt wrong. Heavy. An unfamiliar chill bit at her fingers even though the sun was climbing.

She stopped by the brook near the square. Its waters gurgled sluggishly, pale patches of frost clinging to the edges. Summer reeds that should have been tall and green were brittle and curled. On a nearby branch, a

blackbird sang — beginning in a bright, spring melody before faltering into the mournful tone of an autumn thrush.

A fisherman knelt nearby, frowning at his bucket. “Ice in April,” he muttered when he noticed Evy looking. He tapped the thin frost that had formed along the rim. “Never seen the like.” She wanted to ask more, but he shook his head as if refusing to speak ill of something bigger than both of them.

Evy’s frown deepened. It wasn’t just the big signs — the seam in the sky, the sudden frost — but the tiny ones. The seasons were fighting, and the fight was showing up everywhere.

By the time she reached Mistress Yarrow’s cottage at the far edge of the village, her heart was

beating faster from both the walk and the uncertainty of what she would find.

The cottage looked as if it had been stitched together by a hand that loved both beauty and order. Skeins of dyed yarn hung in the windows, spilling colors into the morning light. Herbs swayed from the eaves — rosemary, mint, lavender — filling the air with a sharp, clean scent.

Evy hesitated at the gate, running her fingers along the wood before pushing it open.

Inside, the warmth was immediate. The mingled scents of lanolin, drying herbs, and the faint tang of dye wrapped around her like a blanket. Mistress Yarrow sat at a great loom, the warp stretching away in shimmering

rows. Her hands moved the shuttle with a rhythm so smooth it seemed the wood was alive.

And in the shifting threads, Evy thought she saw images — a field in bloom, a sudden hailstorm, snow drifting over green meadows.

“You’ve brought it,” Mistress Yarrow said without turning. Her voice was as even as the click of the shuttle.

Evy blinked. “Brought… what?”

The weaver stilled her hands, then turned. Her pale, unblinking eyes fixed on Evy. “The broken piece.”

Evy swallowed and reached into her satchel. She drew out the wrapped thimble fragment, holding it carefully between her palms. Mistress Yarrow did not

take it, but leaned forward, inhaling slowly, as if scent alone could tell the story.

"It's been apart too long," she murmured. "The fabric between seasons loosens faster than I feared."

A chill ran through Evy's spine. "Can it be fixed?" she asked quietly.

Mistress Yarrow rose, moving to a shelf crowded with jars of dye and bowls of unspun wool. Her fingers closed on a single silver thread, impossibly fine. She returned and placed it in Evy's palm alongside the thimble piece.

"Tie this to your satchel," she instructed. "It will show you the rips more clearly. But be warned — each tear will try to pull you through. It will show you where you most wish to be. Sometimes… that is a trap."

Evy's breath caught. Her mind flashed instantly to her parents. She felt a tug inside, sharp as a needle prick, and swallowed hard. "And… where do I find the rest of the thimble?"

The weaver returned to her loom, resuming the steady rhythm. "Ask those who know the seasons by heart — herbalists, wandering gardeners, the spirits in old groves. Each will have a clue, if you can earn it." She lowered her voice. "And beware the River Fog. It waits in the low places. It has a memory for those who wander unprepared."

Her eyes stayed on the threads as she spoke, but Evy noticed her hands pause for just a moment when she mentioned the River Fog — as if even the loom was holding its breath.

When Evy stepped back outside, the village noise felt thinner, as if the air had changed in her absence. She noticed more small oddities — a pigeon frozen mid-step on the rooftop, frost-capped clover quivering under a sudden gust, a stray cat staring at the sky with unblinking eyes.

A shout broke her focus. A young boy had tripped over the cobbles, sending his basket of apples tumbling. The fruit scattered across the lane, rolling under stalls.

Evy hurried to help him gather them, passing back the bruised ones. “Careful,” she said with a small smile. “The ground’s slipperier than it looks.”

The boy studied her a moment. “Thanks, miss. You’ve got… magic hands, don’t you?”

Evy hesitated, then smiled faintly. “Something like that.”

She tied the silver thread to her satchel. It shimmered faintly against the worn fabric and gave a single pulse, like a quiet nudge forward. The thimble fragment warmed in answer. Somewhere beyond the meadows, rivers, and tangled groves, her parents might be walking under the same strange sky. And somewhere ahead, the first clue waited — hidden, silent, and beckoning.

As she left the village, the wind stirred again. This time, its voice was clearer: Not all threads lead home.

She glanced back once, catching a glimpse of Mistress Yarrow still at her loom in the cottage window,

her hands a blur. The weaver did not look up — but the silver thread at Evy's side pulsed again, as if echoing something Yarrow hadn't said aloud.

She kept walking, though her grip on the satchel had tightened. The world was unraveling — or perhaps it had been for a long time, and she was only now seeing the frayed edges.

## Chapter Three – The Whispering Grove

The sun had barely crested the horizon when Evy left the village, the silver thread Mistress Yarrow had given her glinting faintly against her satchel. Each step along the winding path seemed to fall into an invisible rhythm — soft, steady, almost like the earth was playing a song only she could hear. She wondered, briefly, if the song was meant for her or if she was simply intruding on a melody older than the world itself.

The air smelled of damp earth and peppermint, laced with the faint tang of moss and the lingering bite of frost clinging stubbornly to the shaded hollows. The combination made her nose prickle, and she rubbed at it

absently. Somewhere behind her, a dog barked once — sharp, questioning — then fell silent.

Mistress Yarrow's voice replayed in her mind, quiet but unshakable: *The herbalists, the wandering gardeners, the spirits in the old groves… they will know the signs.*

Evy brushed her fingers over the silver thread. The faint pulse beneath her palm was steady, reassuring. She stepped around a fallen branch, the bark damp and slick with moss, and nearly jumped at a rustle in the undergrowth.

A fox burst out, its orange coat lit like fire by the low sun. It stopped mid-step to watch her, head tilted slightly, eyes bright and assessing. Evy found herself

holding her breath, sensing a strange intelligence in the way it lingered.

"Are you…?" she began, unsure whether she was about to ask if it was a spirit, a guide, or simply lost.

The fox twitched an ear, then darted away, its tail a flicker of rust and white disappearing into shadow. She stood for a moment, wondering if she had imagined the way it had waited for her before leaving. *Maybe it was nothing. Or maybe it was a sign that everything from here on would be something.*

The path narrowed as she approached the forest. Wildflowers and nettles brushed against her arms, leaving faint red scratches. A thorn snagged the hem of her skirt, and she bent to work it free, muttering under her breath. The snag came loose all at once, sending her

stumbling forward a step. Dew glittered in the grass like scattered jewels, catching light in impossible colors — blues and greens that shimmered and then faded when she tried to look directly at them.

The forest's odd seasonal war was everywhere — frost crackling on one patch of ferns, warm sun spilling across blooming daisies just steps away. Somewhere to her left, a stream bubbled over smooth stones, and in its flow she thought she heard the cadence of whispered words. She strained to hear, but they slipped away like minnows darting into shadow.

After what felt like an hour of careful walking, she reached a clearing. A low stone wall encircled a small cottage whose roof sagged under moss and ivy.

Smoke curled lazily from the crooked chimney, fading into the pale blue sky.

A small bell chimed as she pushed open the garden gate. The sound was soft but persistent, as though it had been rung deliberately to announce her arrival. She glanced at it warily — it hadn't moved in the wind.

Inside, the air was thick with the scent of dried herbs, oils, and wood smoke. Shelves bowed under the weight of jars, each labeled in careful script. Bundles of sage, lavender, and rosemary hung from the rafters, their shadows swaying gently in the warm light. Dust motes drifted in the sunbeams like tiny golden seeds in the air.

An old woman sat by the hearth, her hair the color of autumn leaves. She didn't look surprised to see Evy.

“You’re here for guidance,” she said, her voice low and even — the kind of voice that made you feel foolish for pretending otherwise.

Evy hesitated. “Mistress Yarrow sent me. She said you could help me… find the thimble. Or at least its trail.”

The herbalist studied her for a moment before gesturing to a worn stool. “Sit. The thimble drifts along the threads of the seasons, slipping between folds in time and space. But it leaves traces — marks so faint you could walk over them a dozen times and never notice.”

She reached for a bundle of pressed herbs tied with silver thread — sage, lavender, and a pale, almost glowing leaf Evy didn’t recognize. The woman’s fingers

moved with precise slowness, as if tying the bundle in such a way was an art form in itself.

"These will bloom in places they shouldn't," the herbalist continued. "When you see them, you'll know you're near a rift. But take care — not all who walk the threads want what you want. Some will smile at you and mean it, others will smile and mean harm. The trouble is telling which is which before it matters."

Evy accepted the bundle, tucking it carefully into her satchel. The silver thread against her fingers thrummed faintly, like it approved of the exchange.

Glancing toward the cottage window, she noticed a faint trail in the grove beyond — leaves disturbed in a winding line, almost too subtle to notice. Tiny footprints,

much smaller than her own, disappeared into the underbrush toward the river.

Her pulse quickened.

“They came early this morning,” the herbalist said quietly, following her gaze. “Didn’t knock.”

Evy looked back at her sharply. “Do you know who they were?”

The woman only shook her head. “Some who follow the rifts don’t wish to be known. Best to find out for yourself. But remember — curiosity is a fine lamp, and also a fine way to start a fire.”

Evy stepped outside, adjusting the strap of her satchel. She traced the trail through the grove, her boots crunching on frost one step and sinking into warm moss

the next. Roots snaked across the path, forcing her to duck and sidestep.

A gust of wind stirred the trees, and for a moment she heard voices in it — faint, overlapping, like many people whispering just beyond understanding.

She stopped, listening hard. The sound faded. Only the rustle of leaves remained.

Hours seemed to pass as she followed the small signs — clusters of out-of-season herbs, the faint tug in the silver thread. The forest's air shifted unpredictably: a bite of winter one moment, the sigh of summer the next.

At one point she nearly tripped over a snarl of roots. The silver thread pulsed sharply, pulling her gaze toward a nearby clearing where bluebells shivered under a dusting of frost despite the warm sun overhead.

The air there felt thick, heavy. Inviting.

Her grip tightened on the satchel. “Not yet,” she whispered.

The leaves around her rustled as though they’d heard and approved.

She moved on, stepping carefully across mossy stones until she reached the riverbank. Mist clung to the surface, curling around reeds and low branches. The River Fog was not yet thick, but its presence was enough to raise goosebumps along her arms.

Mistress Yarrow’s warning whispered through her memory: *It has a memory for those who wander unprepared.*

On the far side of the fog, the trail of tiny footprints continued along the water's edge, bending out of sight.

Evy paused, the silver thread warm against her skin. The grove felt alive — not merely a place, but a presence, its whispers curling at the edge of her mind.

Somewhere ahead lay the next clue. Somewhere beyond that, the rest of the thimble. And somewhere in the weave of it all, perhaps the path back to her parents.

She took a deep breath and stepped forward into the shifting light, letting the steady heartbeat of the silver thread guide her deeper into the threads of the seasons.

## Chapter Four – Clues in the Mist

The mist curled at Evy's ankles like a curious animal, testing her weight with each step along the riverbank. The ground here was soft, tugging faintly at her boots as if the earth meant to hold her in place. The silver thread was warm in her palm, the pulse stronger than it had been all morning.

The trail of tiny footprints hugged the water's edge, dipping into shallow mud before darting back toward a tangle of reeds. She crouched to inspect them — no larger than a child's, but the stride was too even, too purposeful. Whoever made them knew this path well.

A splash made her look up. Something — just a shadow — slipped beneath the surface of the fog-bound

river. The ripples widened, reached the bank, then faded. She waited, every muscle tight. Nothing else moved.

"You're imagining things," she muttered, though she didn't believe it.

Following the prints, she pushed through the reeds. Their leaves were sharp, slicing thin red lines into her fingers when she used them for balance. On the other side, the ground rose slightly, and the footprints vanished into a carpet of last year's leaves.

She scanned the grove. The seasonal war was sharper here — frost-glazed branches arched above beds of wild violets, and fat summer flies buzzed lazily around the skeletal remains of winter berries. The clash of scents — sweet decay, wet soil, and bright floral —

made her head feel light, as though the air itself wanted to distract her.

The prints reappeared ahead, this time alongside faint drag marks, as though something had been pulled — or had resisted being taken.

Her satchel strap slipped off her shoulder. She caught it just before it tumbled to the ground, heart hammering far harder than the small mishap deserved. Still, she checked inside: the herb bundle was intact, the silver thread coiled and steady.

She moved on, keeping one hand near the strap, as if her grip could anchor her.

Somewhere deeper in the mist, a voice laughed — high, quick, and gone before she could place its distance. It wasn't a mocking sound, but neither was it

friendly. It had the same quality as a breeze through a half-closed window: there, then gone, but somehow still lingering.

Her boots crunched on frost again, and when she looked down, the prints turned sharply toward the river. She followed, each step feeling louder than it should in the muffled air.

At the edge, a crooked willow leaned over the water, its lowest branches dipping into the current. Something glimmered there — caught among the twigs.

Evy leaned in. It was a scrap of fabric, pale green, with a frayed edge. She touched it and found it damp but not cold, as though it had only just been left.

A sudden ripple disturbed the water. This time she saw it clearly: a shape sliding under the surface, its

outline too long to be a fish. The silver thread thrummed, hot against her palm.

She backed away a step, the willow's shadow bending across her boots.

"I don't think you want to meet whatever that is," she whispered to herself, glancing toward the trail again.

The footprints continued upriver, into denser mist. She hesitated, then stuffed the scrap of cloth into her satchel. The silver thread pulsed once — not urging her forward or holding her back, but acknowledging the choice.

A branch snapped somewhere ahead.

Her breath caught. Slowly, she crouched behind a cluster of ferns, peering into the pale haze. Through the

shifting mist, she saw movement — a figure, small and slight, moving with a quick, light step. Its head turned sharply toward her hiding place.

For a heartbeat, Evy thought she'd been seen. But the figure only tilted its head, listening to something else, then darted deeper into the fog.

Without thinking, she followed.

The chase was clumsy — roots caught at her boots, reeds slapped her face, and once she nearly fell into a shallow pool slick with green algae. The figure stayed just ahead, its shape always half-hidden by the mist.

When she finally broke into another clearing, the figure was gone. Only the footprints remained, circling once around a large flat stone before vanishing entirely.

The stone itself was carved — not deeply, but enough for her to trace with her fingertips. Spirals and threads twisted together, ending in a shape that might have been a thimble… or a closed eye.

Her chest tightened. She'd seen this mark before.

On the day her parents disappeared.

The silver thread was thrumming now, almost painfully, as though trying to force its warning into her bones.

Evy stepped back, pulse racing, the mist swirling tighter around her ankles. The carved stone seemed to watch her.

Then, from the other side of the clearing, came that laugh again. Closer this time.

## Chapter Five – The Hidden Grove

The path narrowed until it was little more than a ribbon through shadow, winding between brambles and oaks heavy with moss. Roots coiled like sleeping serpents, forcing Evy to watch her footing. Each step sank slightly into the damp earth, leaving impressions that softened and faded almost at once beneath a dusting of frost and scattered leaves.

Somewhere above, a single bird called once — a high, clear note — then fell silent, as if the forest had reminded it to hush.

The silver thread tied to her satchel pulsed faintly — not in any rhythm she could name, but like a living

heartbeat. It tugged forward, steady, sure of the way even when she wasn't. She touched the knot to reassure herself it was still tight, fingers brushing the cloth-wrapped herbs from Mistress Yarrow. The leaves within quivered as she passed patches of strange pale blooms along the trail, each one lifting toward her as though scenting something only she carried.

She nearly tripped over a root that jutted from the mud like a crooked finger. The stumble jolted her heartbeat, and she cast a glance behind — half expecting to see someone watching. But the only movement came from drifting shreds of mist curling between the trees.

The grove began to open near a bend in the river, where sunlight fractured into golden shards across the water's slow surface. Beneath a stand of willows, a small

wooden boat rocked gently in the shallows, paint flaking away to reveal pale grain beneath.

The rope tethering it to a gnarled root was freshly twisted, the strands still uneven from a recent knot.

Tiny footprints — crisp and sharp-edged in the damp earth — led from the water's edge into the undergrowth. Whoever had come here hadn't lingered.

Evy crouched behind a wall of ferns, forcing her breath to slow until she could hear the river lapping against the roots.

Two figures knelt among a scatter of wildflowers in the clearing ahead. One had dark-gold hair bound loosely with a leather cord; the other's pale braids caught the sunlight, turning into silver ribbons. Their hands

moved with careful precision, adjusting stems, murmuring words too low to catch.

The magic that wove between them was faint but distinct — the same low hum she'd felt in her thimble fragment.

"They're following the same path," she whispered, almost afraid the words themselves might betray her.

The gold-haired boy's tone carried frustration. "It's not ready. If it blooms now, the River Fog will see it before we can."

The pale-haired one traced a finger over a leaf, inscribing a rune Evy couldn't see but somehow felt. "Patience. Rush it and we lose the clue forever."

Her pulse matched the steady vibration of the silver thread. These were the ones who'd left the sketches. The ones who'd been ahead of her all along.

She leaned for a better view and a dry twig betrayed her. The sharp snap rang out far louder than it should have.

Both boys froze. In the same motion, they rose, hands dropping to the small whittling knives at their belts.

"Who's there?" the gold-haired boy called — wary, but not outright hostile.

Evy stepped forward with her hands raised. "I… I'm Evy," she said, keeping her voice steady. "I'm looking for the Thimble of Seasons."

The pale-haired boy's gray eyes narrowed. "You know of it?"

She unwrapped the cloth in her palm. "I have part of it. I'm looking for the rest."

The gold-haired boy's stance softened, though the tension in his shoulders didn't vanish. "We're looking for something too," he said carefully. "Not sure it's the same."

"Maybe… maybe it is," Evy replied, her voice gentler now.

The pale-haired boy stepped forward. "I'm Etain," he said, offering his hand as though it were a small ceremony.

“Kalliope,” said the gold-haired boy. His voice dropped almost to a warning. “Watch the River Fog. It’s clever, and it’s close.”

Mistress Yarrow’s warning echoed in her mind, and she glanced toward the willows where shadows shifted without wind. Still, with the thimble warm in her palm and two possible allies beside her, the grove seemed less hostile.

They set off together, slipping deeper beneath the willows where the air smelled faintly of wild mint and the leaves shivered as though brushed by unseen wings.

Sunlight fractured to silver here, pooling in quiet places where shadows moved too deliberately to be wind.

Every sound — the rustle of leaves, the crunch of frost, the low thrum of water — became part of a shared rhythm. And with each step, the silver thread hummed more steadily, pulling them toward the hidden heart of the grove.

Evy didn’t know what they would find. But she knew this: the search had truly begun.

## Chapter Six – Shared Paths

The grove stretched ahead like a living corridor, tall oaks and twisted birches forming a canopy of restless light. Each step Evy took was cushioned by a thick quilt of moss and fallen leaves, which seemed to give off a faint hum whenever her boots pressed down, a quiet vibration that echoed through the soles of her feet. The air smelled of damp earth, wildflowers, and something faintly metallic, like magic lingering after a storm.

The silver thread tied to her satchel pulsed in a steady heartbeat, almost in tune with the forest itself. Sometimes, Evy thought it was guiding her — and sometimes she feared it was leading her where it wanted, not where she chose. The pulse seemed to quicken

whenever she approached a bend or clearing, tugging gently at her instincts.

Kalliope and Etain moved with ease born of long practice. Kalliope cleared branches without slowing, his movements efficient and precise, eyes sweeping the ground and the horizon in quick, calculating arcs. Etain, by contrast, walked as though the forest might speak to him at any moment — pausing to study the lean of a flower stem, the curve of a root, or the way sunlight angled through the bare branches. Even the faintest shimmer of dew caught his attention, as if he were reading the forest's secret language.

Evy fell into their rhythm, careful not to snap twigs underfoot. For the first time in months, she didn't feel like a stranger in someone else's world. The grove felt

alive around them, responsive to their presence, as if the trees themselves were curious observers of their journey.

They stopped at a small pool, its surface a living mosaic of all four seasons at once: frost etched delicate patterns along the mossy edges, wildflowers bloomed stubbornly beside them, bright summer sun danced on ripples, and autumn leaves whispered down to rest on the water's surface. The thimble's hum seemed to resonate with the pool, vibrating in Evy's palm like a heartbeat of its own.

Evy crouched, fingertips brushing the water's edge. "I think the next clue is here." She traced the shallow ripples toward faint depressions in the bank, spiraling inward like the coil of a shell.

Etain leaned close, lips moving in silent translation. "These… My mother drew these. She said they marked

paths no ordinary map could hold." His gray eyes flicked to Evy, sharp and questioning. "You're not just chasing the thimble, are you?"

Her throat tightened. "No. I'm looking for my parents. They left… when I was small. I've never known why, but I think this — all of this — might be part of it."

Kalliope's gaze sharpened, the shadows of memory flickering across his face. "Our parents vanished during the River Fog, three years ago. We've been following the signs ever since."

Evy blinked at him. "The sketches…"

Etain nodded, tracing the patterns with his fingers over the air, as if following invisible threads. "Yours and ours are the same trail. The thimble fragment — it's part of what they followed."

Silence settled for a heartbeat, broken only by the river's gentle murmur nearby. The forest seemed to hold its breath along with them.

Kalliope's expression softened, just enough to reveal something unspoken, a connection forged in shared longing. "Then we're looking for the same people."

Evy felt a strange warmth uncoil in her chest, a fragile spark of hope. "We should stay together," she said, voice firm, a small anchor in the vast, shifting grove.

Etain brushed a pale braid from his shoulder. "Agreed. But the River Fog is listening. The more the seasons tear, the harder the path will be."

Kalliope glanced at the shifting light between the trees. Sunlight scattered in dancing patterns, as if teasing the

forest's secrets. "It's not going to wait for us to be ready," he said, tone low but steady.

They moved on, deeper into the grove, where the mist thickened and sunlight became fragmented, almost liquid. Sometimes Evy thought she saw shapes flit in her peripheral vision — a figure just vanishing into the mist, a shadow that moved too fluidly, a glimmer of light that disappeared the moment she looked directly. Each rustle of leaves, each snapping twig, felt both like a warning and an invitation, a test of their alertness and courage.

The thimble pulsed in her hand, faint but insistent, reminding her that the journey was far from over. Each step carried weight, a sense that the forest was alive with more than just plants and animals — that it bore witness

to their pasts, their secrets, and the paths they were destined to take together.

Their shared journey had only just begun. Ahead lay twisting trails, unseen dangers, and answers that might finally reveal why their parents disappeared — and what role the thimble would play in finding them. And as the grove stretched on, whispering softly through the leaves, Evy felt the first quiet certainty that, together, they could face whatever lay beyond the mist.

## Chapter Seven – The First Rift

The grove narrowed as they pressed forward, trees arching high and close, their trunks wrapped in moss and lichen. Sunlight filtered in thin, golden slivers, illuminating patches of frost-laced grass and bursts of early blooms that seemed impossibly out of place. The air was thick with magic, subtle yet insistent, and Evy felt the silver thread in her satchel tug sharply, as if anxious to reach a destination she could not yet see.

"I think it's here," Etain whispered, pointing to a break in the moss-covered earth. The ground shimmered faintly, like heat waves on a sunlit pond. Colors bled into one another unnaturally: frost curled around tender blooms, autumn leaves swirled against tiny spring

sprouts, and the air smelled faintly of both rain and woodsmoke.

Kalliope frowned, kneeling to test the earth. “That’s… not normal.” The shimmer pulsed like a heartbeat. Suddenly, a wall of wind burst from the rift, cold and sweet, knocking leaves into the air and pushing them back with surprising force.

Evy clutched the thimble. Warmth spread through her fingers as she held it up. “It’s a rift!” she exclaimed. “The Thimble of Seasons must be missing a piece here. That’s why the seasons are… twisting.”

The twins exchanged a glance, determination flickering in their eyes. “We need to fix it — together,” Etain said quietly, kneeling to examine the shimmer. He traced the runes in the soil with careful fingers,

murmuring in a low, rhythmic voice. “The rift responds to care, not brute force. Precision matters.”

Kalliope groaned. “Precision… fine. But how? It’s moving!”

Evy took a deep breath, unwrapping the cloth around the thimble fragment. “We stitch,” she said simply. Her voice trembled slightly, but there was certainty in it, a small rhythm that seemed to pull at the air itself. She began to hum softly, a melody her grandmother had taught her — one that carried patience, hope, and the pulse of the natural world.

The silver thread from her satchel stretched taut, glowing softly. The shimmer responded to her melody, pulsing in time with her hum. Kalliope and Etain moved carefully under her guidance: Kalliope steadied the

gusting wind with his hands, while Etain positioned a small sprig of sage across the ground, its magical essence blending with the thimble's power.

"Like this," Evy said, guiding their movements. "Together, we fill the gaps. Each careful motion, each thread of care… it mends the tear."

The rift shivered, convulsed, and then began to settle. Frost melted where it shouldn't, flowers lifted their heads as if stretching, and the scattered autumn leaves stilled. Light returned to the grove in warm, golden shafts.

Evy exhaled, hands trembling. "It's… done. For now."

Etain studied the ground, tracing the faint marks left behind. “It won’t be the last,” he said softly. “But now we know we can fix them — together.”

Kalliope grinned, clapping Evy on the shoulder. “I’ll admit it. I didn’t think we’d pull it off. But you… you really can stitch magic.”

Evy smiled, a quiet warmth spreading through her chest. “We’re all learning. And this is just the beginning.”

Together, the trio moved onward, deeper into the grove, the silver thimble pulsing faintly in Evy’s satchel. With each careful step, they understood something fundamental: the seasons, the rifts, and the paths of their parents were all intertwined. Every thread they mended, every clue they followed, would test them — but

together, they were stronger than any tear the world could make.

## Chapter Eight – The River Fog

The path narrowed as they followed the river deeper into the heart of the grove. The water whispered beside them, low and insistent, carrying both the scent of wet moss and a faint tang of something unfamiliar — metallic, almost like ozone after a storm. The silver thread in Evy's satchel pulsed steadily, guiding them forward, yet she could feel its tug grow anxious, as if warning her of what lay ahead.

"Do you feel that?" Kalliope asked, pausing mid-step. He lowered his head, listening. "The river… it's too quiet, too still."

Etain nodded, eyes scanning the edges of the water. “The River Fog is near. It’s always drawn to quiet places, low valleys, pools of water… It waits, watching.”

Evy shivered. The thought of the fog had been a whispered warning in Mistress Yarrow’s voice, a cautionary tale more than a tangible threat. But now, with the air growing thick and heavy, it seemed real — and it seemed to know they were coming.

The first tendrils of mist curled along the river’s surface, thin and silver, twisting like fingers reaching out. It rose slowly, enveloping the trees in ghostly sheets, wrapping the world in a muted, grey hush. Evy felt her chest tighten, a small prickling behind her eyes, as if the fog were probing her thoughts.

“Stay close,” she whispered to the twins. “We stick together, no matter what.”

They nodded, stepping carefully, the soft squelch of damp earth beneath their boots the only sound in the muffled world. Every branch they brushed seemed to thrum with faint energy; every ripple in the river reflected not just their faces, but fragments of other times — past springs, lost summers, autumns they had never seen.

A sudden swirl of fog swept over them, and Evy’s hand tightened around the thimble. Warmth spread from her palm up her arm, and the silver thread pulled taut. She followed its guidance, leading them past twisted roots and fallen logs. The mist thickened, and

she could barely make out the shapes of the trees around them.

Then came the whispering.

Not voices as they knew them, but fragments — words, syllables, echoes of memories. Evy caught bits of them: *"Lost… follow… can't… come back…"* The whispers seemed to swirl around her, curling like smoke through the grove. Her stomach churned, and for a moment, she felt dizzy, disoriented.

Kalliope's voice cut through the haze. "Evy! The thread — it's glowing. Keep following it!"

The silver line stretched forward like a faint pulse in the mist, guiding them step by step. Etain held a sprig of sage in front of him, waving it slowly in wide arcs.

The fog recoiled slightly from the scent, curling around rather than through the protective barrier it created.

As they advanced, Evy noticed faint traces in the soil — prints too small to be hers, impressions of shoes and boots that didn't match any of their own. Someone had been here before, moving carefully, leaving just enough behind for others to follow.

"They've been through," Evy murmured. "Someone else… searching for the same thing."

Etain glanced around, eyes narrowed. "Maybe another seeker. Or someone lost. The River Fog doesn't discriminate. It draws both the innocent and the greedy alike."

Suddenly, the mist thickened, and Evy could see only a few feet ahead. She felt the tug in the thread spike

sharply. It pulled her forward — not just in direction, but in sensation, like it was drawing her toward something essential. Her heart raced, but she trusted it, and so did the twins.

A figure emerged from the fog, faint and shimmering. Not fully solid, not entirely absent. Evy instinctively stepped forward. “Who’s there?” she called, voice steady despite the tremor in her stomach.

The figure hesitated, then took a step back. The mist seemed to embrace it, twisting and swirling around its form. Then, in a voice barely more than a sigh, it spoke.

“You shouldn’t be here,” it said. “The River Fog doesn’t let go of its own.”

Evy swallowed, but she kept her gaze firm. “We’re following the rifts. The Thimble of Seasons… we need to fix it.”

The figure paused, then seemed to waver, caught between the fog and the path Evy was tracing. “Many have tried,” it whispered. “Few succeed. The thimble… your hearts… are what will mend it. But you cannot hurry. You cannot fear.”

The silver thread pulsed violently in her satchel, and Evy felt a rush of warmth and certainty. The fog surged, almost like a challenge, yet they moved as one. Kalliope’s hands brushed branches aside; Etain’s sage flared faintly, dispersing the densest wisps. And Evy hummed softly, a melody of care, of rhythm, of trust.

Slowly, the fog parted, revealing a shallow depression in the riverbank — the outline of a hidden rift, faintly glowing, pulsing like a heartbeat. The shimmer between seasons hovered above it, unstable, trembling.

Evy knelt, brushing her fingers over the soil. “It’s another one,” she said, eyes wide. “And I… I can feel it. It’s waiting.”

Etain knelt beside her, tracing the faint runes with precision. “We’ve learned enough,” he said. “We know how to stitch it. But this one… this one may test more than our hands. It’ll test our minds, our courage.”

Kalliope stepped forward, a hand on Evy’s shoulder. “Then we face it together. Whatever comes, whatever the River Fog tries, we move as one.”

The three of them exchanged a determined glance. The fog swirled around them, a living entity, yet the pulse of the silver thread held firm. And for the first time, Evy felt the weight of the thimble — not as a burden, but as a guide, a rhythm, and a promise.

Together, they leaned forward, ready to face the River Fog — the first trial of many — and to stitch yet another tear in the fragile fabric of the seasons.

## Chapter Nine – The Enchanted Grove

The grove deepened as the four moved, the air thick with the scent of wet moss, blooming herbs, and the faint tang of magic that made the skin tingle. Light filtered through the dense canopy in fractured shards, illuminating twisted roots, delicate fungi that pulsed faintly in otherworldly colors, and tiny motes of drifting pollen that shimmered like captured starlight. Every step seemed to hum with the rhythm of the forest, as if it were alive and aware of their passage.

Evy's fingers brushed the silver thread tied to her satchel. The thimble hummed stronger than ever, vibrating faintly as if sensing the convergence of fate approaching. She stole glances at her companions:

Kalliope's hands stayed alert, brushing aside low-hanging branches and sensing hidden dangers in the shadows, while Etain moved ahead, sharp-eyed and deliberate. Yet something in Etain's movements unsettled her — a tension she could not name, a shadow in the way his eyes flicked at every root and leaf.

"Etain… what are you hiding?" Evy asked softly, breaking the hush of the grove. "You've been acting strange since we entered here. Pulling the thread so tightly… glancing back…"

Etain froze mid-step, gray eyes flicking to hers, shadowed with conflict. "I'm not hiding from you," he said quietly. "But there's something in my mother's journal… something about the three E's."

“The three… E’s?” Evy frowned, unease rising in her chest.

He exhaled, brushing a braid from his face. “The journal says that when the three E’s meet, the problems with the seasons can be solved for good. I think… you might be my sister. That’s why the thimble responds to you.”

“My sister?” Evy whispered, disbelief and hope mingling, the word tasting strange but familiar.

“Yes,” Etain admitted, avoiding her gaze. “I’ve been trying to figure out if it’s safe to tell you.”

Kalliope, who had been silent until now, muttered, “Wait… if you’re both E’s, why don’t I have a name that starts with E?” He scratched the back of his neck, concern shadowing his features. “Could I have different parents? Or… maybe my role is… different?”

Before the conversation could continue, a rustle in the underbrush startled them. A small figure emerged, almost ethereal in the half-light. Her hair gleamed like sunlight through leaves, and her vivid green eyes shone with curiosity and determination. She carried a satchel brimming with herbs, feathers, and delicate trinkets, each item humming with subtle magic.

“I’m Elowen,” she said softly, her voice blending with the wind and leaves. “I’ve been following the rifts too. The thimble… guided me here.”

Evy exchanged a glance with Etain. His eyes widened in recognition and hope. “That’s… the third E,” he whispered.

The four stepped carefully into a circular clearing at the grove’s heart. In the center, a shallow pool reflected a

sky that was a patchwork of conflicting seasons — spring sunlight, autumn dusk, winter frost, and hints of summer warmth swirling together in chaotic harmony. The thimble vibrated faintly in Evy's hand, thrumming in resonance with the energies of the grove.

"This… must be a rift," she murmured, kneeling at the pool's edge. "The thimble is reacting stronger than anything we've seen."

Elowen's gaze lingered on the shimmering water, her fingers brushing a floating leaf. "It's alive," she whispered. "It will test us — our intentions, focus, hearts. Only together can we stabilize it."

Instinctively, they formed a circle. Etain's voice trembled as he added, "We… have to work together. All three E's. That's the only way."

Kalliope muttered, “Even if I’m just tagging along with the chosen ones…” Yet his stance shifted, shoulders squared, resolve hardening in his eyes.

Evy unwrapped the thimble fragment, holding it over the pool. She began the careful stitching motions she had learned, humming the rhythm her grandmother had taught her — patience, hope, intent flowing through each gesture. Threads glimmered faintly, dancing over the pool’s surface and weaving into its chaotic patterns.

Elowen mirrored her movements, weaving threads of magic from herbs into the air, leaving trails of silver and green sparks. Etain traced precise runes over the water, his voice chanting softly, guiding the pool’s energy with intricate patterns. Kalliope steadied the surrounding air,

shifting stray currents so their combined energies aligned in a delicate balance.

The pool convulsed violently, seasonal forces clashing — frost clawed at young blooms, sunlight fought dusk shadows, autumn leaves spun in chaotic spirals. Each felt the tug deep in their hearts — the rift testing patience, unity, and trust.

“Focus!” Evy called, steadying her voice. “One motion at a time… breathe together!”

Step by step, breath by breath, the rift began to calm. Ripples softened, reflections slowly knitting into harmony. Golden light washed over them, warm and steady, filling the grove with a gentle glow that pushed back the shadows.

Evy exhaled, hands trembling. “It’s… holding,” she whispered.

Etain’s gray eyes softened. “If this works, maybe… we really can fix everything. Together.”

Elowen smiled faintly, the first real smile since they entered the grove. “There are more rifts ahead. But now we know… the three E’s can face them.”

Kalliope remained thoughtful, doubts lingering, but for now, the victory overshadowed uncertainty. They had stitched their first major rift, and the magic had answered them.

Together, they left the enchanted grove, the path ahead tangled and mysterious. The thimble hummed faintly, approving their successful union, and the wind whispered through the trees, carrying the promise of

challenges, revelations, and the bonds that would tie them ever closer.

But as they moved away from the clearing, a sudden hush fell over the forest. The playful glimmers of magic that had danced around them dimmed, and the air grew colder, heavier. Somewhere above, a shadow flitted between branches, moving with silent purpose. A pair of amber eyes glowed briefly, watching them from the canopy before disappearing into the mist.

Evy shivered, glancing at the others. “Did anyone else see that?”

Kalliope stiffened, scanning the shadows. “We’re not alone,” he murmured, tension tightening his jaw.

Etain’s voice was low, cautious. “The rift may be stabilized, but the magic here… it notices everything.

Someone—or something—has been watching us all along."

Elowen's green eyes narrowed. "It hasn't acted yet. But it will. We've only just begun."

A whisper, faint but unmistakable, curled through the trees: *"The thread is tied, but the pattern is not yet complete…"*

The four exchanged wary glances. The grove behind them seemed peaceful, almost inviting, yet they all felt the underlying pulse of danger. The first rift had been mended, but the forest hinted that greater trials waited just beyond the mist.

And somewhere deep in the shadows, a presence stirred, patient and deliberate, waiting for the moment the three

E’s — and their companion — would step into the next challenge.

## Chapter Ten – Secrets and Discoveries

The four settled in a small clearing just beyond the enchanted grove. Sunlight filtered through high branches, scattering golden beams across ferns and mossy stones. The scent of damp earth, herbs, and faint wildflowers filled the air. For the first time since their journey began, there was a pause — a moment of quiet reflection after triumphing over the first major rift.

Evy tugged at her satchel, cradling the thimble fragment. “I… I don’t know everything,” she began. “My parents… they left when I was very small. Herbalists, wandering village to village. They helped people… but they never came back. I found small clues — pressed flowers, tucked-away notes… but I don’t know where they really are.”

Etain listened intently, fingers brushing a braid nervously. “My parents disappeared during the River Fog,” he admitted. “We were raised by others who found us afterward. My mother kept a journal — every herb, rune, secret path noted. I’ve been following it, hoping to find them… hoping to find the truth.”

Elowen’s green eyes were thoughtful. “My parents were healers, too. They traveled with the seasons, helping where needed. I lost track of them after a magical storm scattered our village. Since then, I’ve been following the rifts, the thimble… hoping they’d lead me to answers.”

Kalliope leaned against a tree, frowning. “Our parents… I don’t know if I share them with Etain now,

but they left clues about the River Fog, about the rifts. Now… it seems all our paths have converged."

Evy's voice trembled. "Wait… all three of us? The journal… the thimble… Etain, you really think I'm your sister?"

Etain nodded solemnly. "The journal says that when the three E's meet, the problems with the seasons can be solved for good. Maybe it really means that literally."

Elowen smiled softly. "Three E's… that's us. Maybe it's more than coincidence we've been following the same magical trail."

A hush settled over them as they absorbed the weight of these discoveries. Evy reached into her satchel

and pulled out a small, folded note, worn and faded. She handed it to Etain.

He unfolded it carefully. The handwriting was familiar, precise, looping. The note mentioned a hidden grove, a secret river path, and a “meeting of those with hearts bound to the seasons.” His eyes widened.

“This… is from my mother,” he whispered. “And… it’s meant for you, Evy. She knew… she knew you were the third.”

Kalliope ran a hand through his hair. “That might explain why my name isn’t an E. Maybe my importance is different… but it doesn’t matter. We’re still clearly part of the same quest.”

Elowen's expression softened. "It's all starting to make sense. The rifts, the thimble, our parents… they've been guiding us to meet each other, to work together."

Evy held the thimble, warmth spreading through her fingers. "So… we follow the missing pieces, follow the clues, and maybe… we find our parents along the way."

Etain nodded, determination settling over him. "And we solve the rifts for good. The journal says we can."

Kalliope exhaled.. "Then let's not waste time. I have a feeling the next clue won't be easy."

The four rose together, stepping into dappled sunlight. The thimble hummed softly, acknowledging their unity. With each step, the journey shifted — no

longer just a search for magic, but a quest for family, trust, and the fragile threads that bound them.

The whispers of the grove seemed to follow them, faintly echoing the melody Evy had hummed to mend the rift. It was a song of hope, of patience, and of unity. Somewhere ahead, beyond hidden groves and misted rivers, the next challenge awaited.

## Chapter Eleven – Secrets Unraveled

The mist clung to them like a living veil, curling around tree trunks and draping over the glimmering river. Evy felt the thimble pulse in her satchel, a steady warmth urging her forward. Every step seemed heavier in the damp undergrowth, as if the forest itself resisted their progress.

Kalliope had been unusually quiet, his usual swagger replaced by a tense energy that hummed beneath his skin. Twigs snapped underfoot, echoing in the mist, and a rustle of leaves hinted at creatures watching from the shadows. As they approached a fallen log bridging the river, Kalliope misjudged a step and a branch snapped sharply.

Before anyone could react, he vaulted across the river, landing perfectly on the other bank with a lightness that made Evy's jaw drop.

"Kalliope… how did you—?" she began, voice cracking with astonishment.

He grinned sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck. "I… I don't know. I've always been able to do things like this. Jump further, climb higher, hold my breath longer. Never really thought about it. Thought everyone could… sort of."

Elowen's green eyes widened. "That's… unusual," she murmured. "I was raised among fairies. They taught me subtle ways to read the land, the herbs, and the patterns of magic. Even I can tell — that's not ordinary."

Kalliope ran a hand through his hair, looking more anxious than proud. “Wait… you mean my abilities are… real?”

“Yes,” Evy said, catching her breath and trying to steady her pulse. “And they’re connected to the magic of the seasons.”

Etain stepped forward, holding the journal delicately as though it might shatter under pressure. “There’s something you all need to see,” he said, flipping to a fragile, almost illegible page. “A note from my mother. She mentions a town of sorcerers and nobility… and a mistake in their records. Something about a child born unexpectedly — unspecified, but i suspect it might be someone like Kalliope.”

Kalliope’s eyes narrowed. “Me?”

Etain nodded slowly, frowning. “And… it confirms something else I’ve suspected. You and I aren’t truly twins. Elowen and I… we are, maybe. But the three E’s — Evy, Etain, and Elowen — are still connected to the thimble. The magic flows differently through all of us. Wait, perhaps the three E’s are triplets, and you, Kalliope, are… something else entirely.”

Elowen tilted her head, regarding Kalliope with a faint smile. “That explains why the journal’s warnings seemed incomplete. It wasn’t meant for you, Kalliope — it was meant to guide the three E’s. And you… you were always part of the path, just differently somehow.”

Kalliope exhaled, running a hand across his face. “So I’m not a twin. But I have… these abilities. And you

two…" He gestured toward Etain and Elowen. "You are the true E-twins… er, triplets?"

"Yes," Etain said firmly. "The journal says that when the three E's meet, we can mend the rifts fully. That's why the thimble responded to you, Evy. We all play a role — different, but crucial."

Evy felt a rush of clarity. "So Kalliope's abilities… my stitching magic… Etain and Elowen's knowledge… it all fits. Together, we can really fix the seasons."

Elowen smiled faintly. "And now we know. Our paths were meant to converge, but the truth about our families… it's far more complicated than any of us imagined."

Kalliope rubbed his arms, awkwardly shifting from foot to foot. “Well… I guess being part of this magical mess isn’t so bad, as long as I have you guys.”

Etain allowed a small, reluctant smile. “We’ll need all our strengths for the rifts ahead — yours, Kalliope’s, Evy’s, mine… and Elowen’s fairy knowledge.”

Evy tightened the thimble in her satchel, feeling its pulse strengthen. “Then let’s move forward. Rifts to mend, clues to follow, and maybe… a way to find our parents.”

As they pushed deeper into the misty grove, the forest seemed to shift subtly. Vines curled where none had been before. Small magical mischiefs emerged: a swarm of glowing insects danced around their faces,

teasing Evy until she laughed, wiping her eyes; Kalliope's foot caught in a tangle of roots, and Etain had to grab his sleeve to steady him; Elowen whispered protective charms, muttering under her breath at the forest's attempts to confuse them.

Each obstacle, small and mundane as it might seem — slipping on moss, tangled branches, glowing illusions of rifts — tested their coordination, their patience, and their trust in one another. And every time, the thimble pulsed, guiding them like a heartbeat through the chaos.

By nightfall, they reached a small clearing. Exhausted, muddy, and scratched by branches, they paused. Their breaths came in ragged puffs, laughter mingling with groans of irritation.

“We really should start a checklist,” Kalliope muttered, “for traps, rifts, and random forest… annoyingness.”

Evy grinned, brushing dirt from her sleeves. “Agreed. But at least we’re together. That’s what matters.”

The mist curled around them, thickening, whispering of the challenges still to come. Yet in that fragile moment of respite, they realized their strengths, their flaws, and their unity — the very things that would allow them to face the next rift.

## Chapter Twelve – The Keeper of Secrets

The mist thickened as they pressed forward, curling around them like a living entity. Shafts of sunlight filtered through the dense canopy, creating dappled, almost hypnotic patterns on the mossy floor. Each step carried a hint of danger: uneven roots, shifting stones, and sudden illusions of rifts flickering before their eyes, as if the forest itself were testing their resolve.

The path to the wooden cottage Lysandra had mentioned was anything but easy. Thorned vines surged up unexpectedly, twisting like serpents across narrow trails. Small gusts of wind carried whispering voices, sometimes mocking, sometimes coaxing, brushing against their ears with words they could almost

understand. Patches of sunlight shifted abruptly, casting illusions of gaping rifts that vanished as soon as they blinked. And small stone golems, no taller than a child, sprang up from the underbrush, forcing the group to dodge, leap, and improvise.

Kalliope's agility became invaluable. He leapt over branches and vines, ducked under low-hanging limbs, and steadied Evy when roots threatened to trip her. "These obstacles aren't natural," he said, landing lightly on the moss. "It's like the forest itself doesn't want anyone getting through."

Etain knelt over the roots, tracing runes with careful precision, murmuring in the ancient language of the seasons. Elowen whispered fairy spells under her breath, trying to calm the mischievous illusions that flickered

like sparks. Evy stitched tiny charms along the trails, threads glowing faintly as they stabilized the forest's magical disruptions.

Small problems cropped up constantly: a rock slid beneath Kalliope's foot, an unexpected gust blew out the charms' minor protective energies, and the four were forced to pause, regroup, and laugh at themselves for getting tangled or startled. Each misstep reminded them that the forest was not just alive—it was aware.

By mid-afternoon, sweat dripping and clothing damp, they finally glimpsed the cottage, tucked snugly between two towering oaks. Smoke spiraled lazily from its chimney, curling into the mist, and the scent of herbs, resin, and burning candles carried a comforting warmth.

An elder emerged, her back bent with age, hands lined with decades of work, yet her gaze was sharp, piercing, and knowing. “Visitors,” she said softly, yet with authority. “I’ve been expecting you. Or perhaps the thimble has.”

Evy stepped forward cautiously. “Who are you?”

“I am Lysandra, Keeper of Records,” she said, voice calm but commanding. “Of births, disappearances, and the threads of magic bound to families like yours. I know of your parents, and I can tell you truths that no one else will.”

Etain’s gray eyes narrowed, a flicker of anticipation lighting them. “We need to know everything — our births, our families, where our parents are now, how to fix this thimble…”

Lysandra beckoned them inside. The cottage was a maze of shelves, laden with jars, scrolls, and books bound in leathers of all colors and textures. Herbs hung from the ceiling, their aromas mingling with parchment and candle smoke, creating a heady mix that felt alive with magic. Small glass vials caught stray sunlight, scattering prisms across the floor like tiny rainbows.

“None of you are directly related,” Lysandra began, her voice steady, each word deliberate. “You are not siblings by blood. However, each of you descends from noble families with interwoven magical legacies. The three E’s — Evy, Etain, and Elowen — were intended to form a pact, strengthening your families’ magical influence over the seasons. But the birth of Kalliope disrupted this plan, causing rifts in the lineage and separating you as children.”

Kalliope ran a hand through his hair, disbelief mingling with awe. “So… I am the mistake?”

“You are a pivotal piece of the puzzle,” Lysandra said softly. “Your abilities and presence were always meant to guide others. Though not one of the three E’s, your role is critical in uniting magic, family, and the thimble.”

Evy exhaled slowly, taking in the weight of her family’s secret. “So we’re not blood siblings… but magic and history tie us together?”

“Yes,” Lysandra confirmed. “And that connection allows the thimble to respond and rifts to be mended — but only if you work together.”

She shared the histories of their parents: Evy’s parents had traveled as herbalists, Etain and Elowen’s families were deeply connected to sorcery and fairy lore, and

Kalliope's father had been excluded after his birth disrupted the magical pact. The last known location of each family was near the ruins of **Wynthorne**, beyond the eastern meadows, following the thimble fragments.

"Your journey does not end here," Lysandra warned, her gaze sharp. "The path to Wynthorne is perilous. Forests will shift, guardians will test your courage, and illusions will prey on your fears. Only your combined strengths — Kalliope's agility, Evy's stitching magic, and Etain and Elowen's knowledge — can see you through. The thimble will keep guiding you to its other half, wherever that may be. Have you been to Wynthorne?"

The four exchanged determined glances. The thimble pulsed brighter, sending ripples of energy through the air, a tangible beat of promise and destiny.

Stepping back into the grove, they felt the mist swirl around them, whispering of trials to come. Each obstacle ahead would test not only their skills, but the fragile threads of trust, family, and destiny that now bound them together. And yet, for the first time in their lives, they felt the subtle thrill of purpose—the quiet certainty that, together, they could face the impossible.

## Chapter Thirteen – The Path to Wynthorne

The eastern meadows stretched endlessly, golden in the late afternoon sun, but beauty hid danger. The thimble pulsed steadily in Evy's satchel, a heartbeat of guidance and warning. Every step along the narrow trail tested their focus and resolve.

Almost immediately, the ground shifted. Twisted roots erupted like snakes, forming walls, arches, and traps. Illusions shimmered in the air: multiple versions of themselves walked divergent paths, phantom rifts threatened to tear the earth apart, and shadowy figures mimicked their movements with eerie precision.

Kalliope's eyes sparkled with excitement. "Ah, so this is the forest's idea of fun! Let's see how useful I

really am." He vaulted over a twisting root, landing with unnatural precision.

Evy murmured, weaving silver threads from the thimble. Light wrapped around the roots and rocks, stabilizing the shifting ground. "Focus," she whispered. "One step at a time. Thread by thread."

Elowen traced delicate patterns in the air. "The illusions feed on fear and hesitation," she said softly. "Stay connected. If even one of us falters, the forest will exploit it."

Etain's gaze swept the shadows constantly. "Every guardian, every rift, every trick is both trial and warning. We must be precise, cautious, and united."

A roar tore through the meadow. Mist coalesced into a towering guardian of bramble, bark, and flickering leaves. Amber eyes glowed, intelligent and unsettling.

Kalliope tensed. “Step back,” he muttered, then darted forward. Dodging snapping branches and twisting limbs, he baited the guardian away, clearing a path for the others.

Elowen whispered a spell, bending a shimmer of light around the guardian. Confused, its gaze lingered on them before stepping aside, acknowledging their clear intent.

Evy knelt, feeling the thimble’s pulse. “It responds to unity. Alone, we can’t succeed. Together, though, our magic flows stronger.”

Etain traced maps and old notations in the journal, eyes never leaving the shifting illusions. “Every obstacle shapes us, preparing us. The thimble will only respond fully if we reach Wynthorne as one.”

Roots tangled Kalliope’s legs, sunlight tricked Evy into unstable patches, and phantom rifts lured Etain. Small mishaps abounded: charms spilled, slips on moss, glowing mushrooms ignited by mistake. Each time, they paused, helped one another, and laughed through frustration.

Twilight revealed a hidden valley. The ruins of Wynthorne rose in the distance — crumbling towers entwined with vines and delicate flowers, remnants of a city alive with quiet magic.

Evy's heart raced. "This is it… the next piece of the thimble, and maybe… clues about our parents."

Etain looked at the group, then the valley. "We've come this far together. The forest, illusions, guardians — all preparing us. Wynthorne will test more than strength. It will test our trust, focus, and hearts."

Kalliope grinned nervously. "Good. I was hoping for more excitement."

Elowen's green eyes sparkled. "And perhaps, finally, answers about our families… and why the thimble chose us."

Stepping into the valley, the thimble pulsed like a living heartbeat, guiding them deeper into the ruins.

## Chapter Fourteen – The Ruins of Wynthorne

The ruins sprawled before them: jagged towers entwined with ivy, glowing fungi pulsing faintly with life. A low hum vibrated through the air, deep enough to rattle bones. The thimble pulsed violently, warning of the dangers ahead.

In the central plaza, the ground shuddered. Cracks widened, shadowy forms rose — guardians of stone, smoke, and flickering light, left to shield thimble fragments.

Kalliope launched himself into the fray, coiling and twisting with unnatural agility. Snapping tendrils

lunged, but he dodged, kicked, and rolled with uncanny precision, shattering smaller guardians.

"Evy! Thread the rifts!" Etain shouted as a fissure opened beneath a crumbling archway. Evy's fingers moved in practiced rhythm, weaving silver threads to stabilize the ground.

Elowen danced around shadows, scattering sparks of fairy light, confusing the guardians while protecting the team.

A stone-serpent guardian lunged at Kalliope. He rolled beneath it, narrowly avoiding a crushing tail. "Keep them busy!" he yelled, diving toward another attacker.

Evy's threads wrapped the base of a guardian, while Etain traced runes in the air. The creature froze. Kalliope struck its legs, and it shattered into dust.

The plaza became a whirlwind. Shadows clawed and snapped. Evy stabilized the ground, Elowen misled the guardians, Kalliope smashed through attacks, and Etain's runes struck with precision.

One guardian flanked Etain. Kalliope flipped over it, landing behind it. His hands glowed faintly — a manifestation of his unique abilities — and the guardian exploded into black sparks.

"Focus on the thimble!" Evy called, feeling its pulsing resonance. "It responds to unity — if we falter, we fail!"

Etain traced a complex binding rune, drawing energy from the thimble. A silver beam struck a massive shadow creature, which twisted, screamed, and burst into fragments of mist.

Elowen guided them to the next thimble fragment, embedded in a cracked pillar. “Almost there! Protect it!”

Together they converged: Kalliope smashed attacking guardians, Evy stitched charms into the fragment, Etain stabilized it with runes, Elowen cast blasts of fairy light.

A final guardian, massive and wreathed in shadows, rose from the central fountain, roaring.

“Together!” Kalliope shouted. They formed a circle. Evy wove a glowing lattice over the fountain,

Etain traced binding runes, Elowen cast fairy light, and Kalliope struck the creature's legs.

The guardian collapsed, dissipating into harmless mist. Silence followed, broken only by ragged breaths.

The thimble fragment hovered in Evy's hands, radiating silver light. She looked at her friends. "We did it. Together."

Kalliope grinned, battered but exhilarated. "And that's why I don't need to be 'legitimate' to matter," he laughed.

Etain and Elowen exchanged a glance, the thrill of victory masking the weight of their family secrets.

"One fragment down," Etain murmured. "Many more to go — and stronger challenges await."

The thimble pulsed gently, a quiet reminder: the quest was far from over. But now, the four of them understood — together, they could face anything Wynthorne, the rifts, or the world could throw at them.

## Chapter Fifteen – Echoes of Wynthorne

The ruins of Wynthorne stretched around them like a labyrinth, crumbling towers and ivy-choked streets twisting in every direction. The thimble fragment pulsed faintly in Evy's satchel, tugging insistently toward something deeper within the ruins.

"I don't like this," Kalliope muttered, crouching behind a toppled column. "Every time I think the guardians are gone, something worse shows up."

Evy tightened her grip on the fragment. "I know, but we've got each other. And the thimble is guiding us. Step by step."

Elowen pointed to a stone archway whose edges glimmered faintly with residual magic. “Look there. The thimble’s glow is stronger in that direction. Maybe it’s leading us to the next clue.”

Etain frowned, flipping through his mother’s journal. “It mentions a ‘hidden chamber beneath the old clock tower.’ But it warns — the path isn’t simple. Wards, illusions… traps designed to test more than just strength.”

Kalliope groaned, rubbing the back of his neck. “Wards? Illusions? I just got used to fighting things that exist. This sounds like homework from a sadistic wizard.”

“You’ll get used to it,” Evy said with a small smile, “but we have to think, not just fight. Pay attention, trust the thimble, and trust each other.”

As they approached the archway, a strange wind swirled, carrying whispers that seemed to curl around their ears. Shadows danced unnaturally in the corners, forming fleeting shapes that mimicked their every movement.

“Did you hear that?” Elowen asked, her voice tight. “It’s like the shadows are… mocking us.”

Etain clenched the journal in one hand, steadying himself. “Ignore them. Focus on the thimble. It knows the way.”

Suddenly, a figure emerged from the shadows. Cloaked and tall, a staff tipped with moonlit crystal in hand.

“Who are you?” Kalliope demanded, drawing a deep breath. “Another guardian?”

The figure lowered the hood, revealing sharp features and silver-streaked blue hair. “I am Corvin, Keeper of Lost Knowledge. I’ve been expecting you — or perhaps your parents’ arrival.”

Evy stepped forward, curiosity outweighing fear. “You know our parents?”

Corvin nodded gravely. “I knew them long ago. They left fragments of their knowledge for you, hidden throughout these ruins. But to proceed, you must answer

questions — about yourselves, your families, and your reasons for seeking the thimble."

Etain exchanged a glance with Elowen. "We can answer," he said. "We are the three E's. We seek to mend the rifts… and to find our parents."

Kalliope crossed his arms. "I'm part of this too. I've got abilities that help. Don't forget me."

Corvin's gaze flicked to him. "Ah… the unexpected child. Your abilities are extraordinary, Kalliope. Not one of the three E's, yet vital to the balance."

Evy glanced between them. "We already knew that."

“Do you?” Corvin’s voice was soft but probing. “You believe you know your parents, but truth is tangled in secrets, lies, and… mistakes. You must speak honestly — or the thimble will not guide you further.”

Etain swallowed, his voice firm. “Fine. I know of the River Fog, the journals, and my mother’s notes about Wynthorne. I know Kalliope and I aren’t twins — Elowen and I are — and the prophecy of the three E’s.”

Elowen added quietly, “I was raised by fairies. I know herbs, magic, and subtle ways of the world. I’ve kept this hidden, fearing no one would understand.”

Kalliope scowled but admitted, “I’ve got… strength, agility, reflexes beyond normal humans. I’ve never known why… but now I understand. I’m the mistake that set everything in motion.”

Evy looked down at the thimble. “I have sewing magic — charms that mend fabric, rifts, and small tears in time. That’s all I’ve ever known. But it works best when we are together.”

Corvin nodded approvingly. “Honesty strengthens the magic. Now, observe carefully.” He stepped aside, revealing a spiral stone stairway winding downward. “At the bottom lies a chamber with a book — your parents’ notes, preserved for you. The path is guarded. Only by working together — combining abilities, knowledge, and trust — will you reach it unscathed.”

Kalliope smirked, flexing his fingers. “Guess we’re fighting again, huh?”

Elowen rolled her eyes. “Always seems that way.”

Etain glanced at the spiral, journal clutched tightly. “Ready?”

Evy tightened the thimble in her hands. “As ready as we’ll ever be.”

They descended the spiral, aware of shadows lurking, illusions dancing, and magical traps poised to strike. They shared whispered stories — bits of their parents’ lives, fears, laughter cutting through the tension.

“This path… it’s testing us,” Kalliope muttered.

“Exactly,” Evy said. “And the thimble will guide us — if we don’t let fear divide us.”

Etain added, “Every skill, every bit of magic, every truth we know — we need it all.”

Elowen smiled faintly, brushing a lock of hair from her face. “Then let’s see what secrets our parents left for us.”

The spiral grew darker, whispers louder. Shadows clawed at their heels. But united, they moved forward — each pulse of the thimble a heartbeat reminding them they were stronger together.

## Chapter Sixteen – Whispers in the Shadows

The spiral staircase ended in a circular chamber, walls lined with ancient runes and faded tapestries. In the center rested a stone pedestal, holding a leather-bound book that pulsed faintly in response to the thimble.

Evy approached first, her fingers trembling. “This… this has to be it.”

Kalliope leaned against a crumbling wall, catching his breath. “Finally. I thought we’d be dodging traps forever.”

Elowen’s green eyes scanned the room. “Not yet. Something feels off.”

Etain nodded, flipping through his mother's journal. "This book is protected. Magic hangs heavy in the air — wards, probably illusions. We need to move carefully."

Evy placed the thimble on the pedestal. Its silver glow spread, illuminating the runes on the walls. The book creaked open as if inviting them forward.

A soft, low voice whispered from the shadows. "So… these are the ones the thimble has chosen… the three E's… and the one born from error."

Kalliope's hand flew to the hilt of a dagger. "Who's there? Show yourself!"

From a shadowed archway, a figure stepped forward — cloaked in deep gray, face hidden beneath a

hood. Pale hands and eyes glinting in curiosity were the only visible features.

"I've been watching," the figure said softly. "Listening to your stories, confessions, truths about your parents, and the lies that shaped your paths. Much like your herbalist friend once said, Evy."

Evy stiffened. "You've… been following us?"

The figure shrugged. "Observing. Learning. The thimble attracts attention — from those who mean no harm… and those who do. I wanted to see how the three E's work together… and how the one born unexpectedly fits into the pattern."

Etain narrowed his eyes. "Why? Who are you?"

“I am Selwyn,” the figure replied. “Keeper of Watchful Eyes. I track forces affecting the balance of magic, rifts, and lost families. I know much about your parents — and far more than you realize.”

Elowen stepped forward. “Then tell us! Why did they leave? What happened with the River Fog? And… about Kalliope?”

Selwyn inclined his head. “Patience. The answers lie in this book, and in what you yourselves have uncovered. But the chamber’s knowledge is dangerous if misused. You must prove you can work together before it is fully revealed.”

Kalliope growled. “Prove it? We’ve fought shadows, illusions, guardians, and forests. What more do you want?”

Selwyn's voice was calm. "Understanding. Trust. Willingness to reveal everything — not just to each other, but to yourselves. Only then will the book yield the truths you seek, and prepare you for the next challenge: finding your parents."

Evy felt the thimble pulse warmly, steadying her heartbeat. "I think… we're ready. We've learned to trust each other, fought together, shared our truths."

Selwyn tilted his head. "Then begin. Speak. Share your lives, abilities, families, and hopes. Let the book know you are worthy."

The four sat in a circle, initially hesitant. Slowly, their voices rose. Kalliope described his unnatural abilities, Evy spoke of her sewing charms, Etain

recounted the journals and his mother's warnings, and Elowen revealed her hidden fairy knowledge.

The book pulsed with each confession, the thimble glowing brighter as if acknowledging their honesty. Outside the chamber, Selwyn observed silently, eyes reflecting silver light.

"Ah… the threads are weaving as they should," he murmured. "Soon, the next steps will be mine to guide — or to obstruct. Very soon."

In the shadows, the Keeper's gaze followed every pulse, every secret, and every choice, silently tracking the four travelers as their journey toward the truth of Wynthorne and their families continued.

## Chapter Seventeen – The Book That Bites Back

The chamber seemed to hold its breath. Shadows curled across the walls, and dust motes floated lazily in the silver glow of the thimble. The pedestal's book had stopped pulsing, as if waiting for the group's next move.

Evy reached for it. The instant her fingers brushed the cover, a sharp jolt ran up her arm.

"Ow! It bit me!" she yelped, yanking her hand back.

"That's… not possible," Kalliope muttered, stepping closer, his brow furrowed. "Books don't bite."

“This one does,” Etain said grimly, flipping through his mother’s journal. “It’s testing you — and probably all of us.”

Before anyone could argue, the chamber’s runes flared crimson. Threads of magic rose from the walls, twisting into a monstrous shape — a guardian of shadow and silver, eyes glowing like molten coals, mouth splitting into jagged rows of teeth.

Elowen drew a small pouch from her belt. “A Bound Keeper. Fairy archives warn of them. They protect knowledge from unworthy hands.”

“Well,” Kalliope growled, twin daggers in hand, “let’s be worthy — or at least survive.”

The guardian lunged. Kalliope met it mid-stride, blades sparking as they clashed against the semi-solid

form. Tendrils of darkness lashed out, wrapping around his legs and yanking him down.

"Hold still!" Elowen shouted. She hurled a vial of glowing dust at the tendrils. They sizzled away, vanishing in clouds of cold light.

Evy grabbed the thimble. "I can channel it!"

Etain darted beside her. "Focus it into the book! The guardian is bound to its magic — if we unlock it, it should vanish!"

The guardian swiped at them. Its claws slashed across the pedestal; runes flared brighter, and the book's leather cover rippled like water.

Kalliope shouted, breath ragged, "NOW, Evy!"

Pressing the thimble against the book, silver light erupted, flooding the chamber. The guardian roared, twisting, then dissolved into motes that sank into the runes, fading away.

Silence.

The book lay open, pages turning on their own until they stopped at a deep green entry. Etain read aloud:

*"To our children — wherever they may be scattered. We, of the noble houses of Estara, Eldryn, and Eryndral, sought to bind our families together. Betrayal splintered the bond, and magic unraveled the seasons. Three children — heirs — were separated, hidden, and sent down paths to reunite one day. The three E's. But*

*there was a fourth — unexpected, born of a broken vow — whose presence would shift the fate of the realms."*

"That's… us," Elowen whispered.

Kalliope frowned. "Except I'm not an 'E'."

Etain glanced at him. "You're the fourth. The one born from… the broken vow."

Evy swallowed hard. "So our parents knew… that we'd have to fix their mistakes?"

The pages flipped again, revealing a map in shimmering silver — four paths, each leading to a different symbol.

Elowen leaned closer. "Those are thimble fragments. Four more."

“And one’s near the River Fog,” Etain said quietly, eyes narrowing. “The place Selwyn warned us about.”

From the shadows, Selwyn’s voice echoed softly. “Now you see why I’ve been watching. Others know of these fragments and will kill for them. You’ve awakened something tonight — and it will be coming for you.”

Kalliope smirked faintly. “Good. Let them come.”

Evy tightened her grip on the thimble. “We’re not stopping — not until the seasons are whole again.”

Selwyn stepped into the light, hood casting shadows over his face. “Then may the seasons guide you… and may you be ready when the past comes knocking.”

The runes dimmed. The map shimmered. Far away, in some unseen place, something stirred — listening.

## Chapter Eighteen – Shadows in Wynthorne

Outside the Keeper's chamber, the narrow stone hallways were unnervingly still. The chill in the air pressed against them like invisible hands.

Kalliope's voice was barely above a whisper. "Anyone else feel like we're being followed?"

"You mean since the book told us we're heirs to three noble houses and one scandal?" Elowen muttered. "Yes. Definitely."

Etain kept his journal close. "Stay sharp. Selwyn said they'd come for us, and I—"

A black flame arrow hissed through the air. Evy ducked instinctively; it buried itself in the wall behind her, sizzling like oil on a hot pan.

Figures emerged from shadows ahead and behind — cloaked, masked, their hands wreathed in pale green light.

Assassins.

The leader's voice cut through the gloom. "The thimble. The map. Hand them over, and we may let you live."

Kalliope spun his daggers. "Not much for negotiation, huh?"

The assault began.

Evy slammed her palm against the floor, summoning gusts of seasonal wind that hurled three attackers backward. Elowen scattered fairy dust that bloomed into dazzling sparks, momentarily blinding several more.

Etain muttered a word from the journal — resonant, commanding. The stone floor buckled, sending two assassins tumbling into walls with cracking echoes.

Yet they kept coming.

Kalliope moved like a whirlwind, blades flashing in the dim light. “Guess that’s the ‘unnatural capabilities’ talking,” he called over his shoulder, striking down another masked figure.

One assassin raised a silver lantern, unlit but pulsing faintly. Evy froze mid-strike.

“That’s… not a weapon,” she whispered.

“It’s the Lantern of Pyrelight,” Elowen said softly. “A fragment of eternal flame, stored in relic form.”

The leader smirked. “You know your lore, fairy-born. A shame you won’t live to see it burn again.”

In a swirl of shadow, the assassins vanished — lantern and all.

“Great,” Kalliope groaned, picking up a discarded mask. “Now we’ve got two quests — seasons and lanterns.”

Etain’s expression darkened. “They wouldn’t carry a lantern unless it was for something worse.”

Evy stared down the empty hall. “We’ll get it back. And when we do, we’ll make sure it never burns out again.”

Behind them, deep in the Keeper’s chamber, the book’s runes flickered once more. A faint voice, barely a whisper, carried through the stone:

*"When the flame fades, the frost will rise."*

They didn’t hear it. But whatever was listening… did.

## Chapter Nineteen – The Chase Through Emberwood

The moment Evy, Kalliope, Elowen, and Etain stepped past the crumbled archway, the forest swallowed the moonlight. Trees loomed like blackened sentinels, their bark curling and cracked, glowing faintly ember-red along the fissures. Leaves drifted down in slow spirals before vanishing midair, their edges wisping into smoke as if they had never existed. Shadows stretched unnaturally long, twisting around the trunks, and the air smelled of ash, ozone, and something metallic, tangling with the scent of damp earth.

“They went this way,” Etain murmured, crouching over a trail of glowing ash footprints that shimmered like molten gold.

Evy frowned, fingers brushing the faint heat rising from the path. “Footprints shouldn’t glow.”

“Neither should leaves,” Kalliope muttered, swiping one from his shoulder. It hissed as it dissolved. “I hate this place.”

A distant glimmer caught their eyes — the stolen **Lantern of Pyrelight** — flickering like a heartbeat between the gnarled trees.

“Move!” Evy shouted, breaking into a run, boots crunching on the ash-laden soil. The others

followed, weaving between twisted trunks whose branches clawed at their cloaks. Every few steps, the forest shifted subtly: paths folding in on themselves, roots twisting like serpents to block the way, and tiny glowing eyes blinking from dark hollows.

“They’re leading us somewhere,” Elowen warned, her voice tight with unease.

“That’s fine,” Kalliope said, grinning despite the tension. “Because I plan to catch them before we get there.”

The first trap struck without warning. A branch whipped out like a living whip, knocking Etain off his feet. The ground beneath him rippled like water, sucking him in up to his waist.

“Hang on!” Evy slammed her hand to the soil, summoning a gust of wind that solidified the earth just enough for him to scramble free.

The lantern’s glow danced ahead again, teasing them, flickering like a pulse through the mist.

They pressed on, hearts pounding, dodging nets of glowing vines that twined like snakes, leaping over sudden bursts of flame shooting from hollowed trunks, and balancing across a narrow bridge made entirely of fireflies, their lights pulsing like tiny, fragile hearts. Each step seemed to hum with the forest’s dark will, every shadow hiding something waiting to strike.

Finally, they burst into a clearing. The assassins stood in a semicircle, the leader holding the **Lantern of Pyrelight** aloft. Its pale flame burned brighter than any torch, licking the glass with restless heat.

“You followed well,” the leader said, voice cold and smooth. “Perhaps you are worthy of the game.”

“What game?” Kalliope demanded, scanning the shifting shadows for hidden blades or traps.

“The one that comes every hundred years,” the leader said, voice chilling. “When the Eternal Lantern fades, those who seek to relight it must first survive the dark.”

Etain's eyes narrowed. "You're not relighting anything. You're keeping it for yourself."

The leader smiled, a flash of silver teeth catching the ember-light. "Perhaps. Or perhaps we're making sure the wrong hands never touch it again."

A shadow swept overhead — enormous wings blotting out the ember-glow. The ground shook as a massive, fire-scaled beast landed between them, claws sinking slightly into the ash-covered soil. Its molten-gold eyes flicked from the lantern to Evy.

The assassins scattered into the forest with cries and curses.

The creature's voice rumbled like logs cracking in a blaze:

"The flame must not die. But it cannot be guarded here."

Its claws enclosed the lantern gently, lifting it high. The air shimmered, embers swirling around the glowing glass, carrying sparks that drifted like tiny stars.

Evy stepped forward, heart hammering. "Where will you take it?"

The beast's wings unfurled, scattering glowing leaves like sparks in a storm. "To where frost and fire meet. Seek it when the century turns."

And then it was gone, disappearing into the ember-lit sky, leaving the forest eerily silent. Only the faint scent of ash and magic lingered.

Kalliope let out a long breath. “So… that’s our next problem, isn’t it?”

Evy glanced at the others. “Not today. First, we finish what we started with the thimble.”

But none of them missed the subtle dimming of the forest’s embers—as if the world itself had begun counting down, waiting for the century’s turn. A chill swept the clearing, carrying with it a whisper of frost, hinting at trials that would test their courage, their loyalty, and the strength of their bonds.

## Chapter Twenty – Threads of the Next Journey

Rain had not stopped since they left Emberwood. It fell in steady sheets against the roof of the herbalist's cottage, a relentless rhythm that filled the quiet like a heartbeat. Evy carefully set the **Thimble of Seasons** on the table. Its once-dull metal now shimmered faintly, the hairline cracks sealed with threads of light they had collected over their journey. The final stitch glowed like captured moonlight, pulsing with an energy that felt alive.

"It's… whole," Elowen whispered, her voice trembling, as if speaking too loudly might undo the miracle.

The herbalist leaned closer, eyes wide and wary. “Whole, yes. But not done. The rips it mends go deeper than you know.”

“What rips?” Kalliope asked, brows furrowed.

The herbalist’s gaze lingered on Etain’s weathered journal in the corner. “The rips between what was and what should have been.”

Before anyone could respond, the journal hummed, vibrating in place like it had a pulse of its own. Its cover quivered, snapping open to a page near the back—one they had never noticed before. Words that had once been faded blazed in gold, curling into the air like a beckoning ribbon of light.

Evy stepped closer, drawn by it. “It’s… pointing somewhere.”

Etain ran her fingers along the glowing script. Her voice was low, reverent, as she read aloud:

*"When the thimble’s final stitch is sewn, follow the seam to where the four seasons meet, and mend the oldest tear."*

Kalliope frowned. “Four seasons? That’s… not a place.”

Elowen shook her head, voice tight with determination. “Not one we know. But if the thimble can repair rifts… maybe there are bigger ones. Ones that matter more than anything we’ve faced.”

The herbalist carefully produced a map so old the ink was nearly erased. Jagged lines, faded symbols, and marks that could almost be mistaken for scratches covered it. “There is such a place—or there was. The **Seamspire**. Few have reached it. Fewer have returned.”

Outside, the storm broke, revealing a thin strip of pale dawn. Tiny motes of light hovered in the rain—warmer than raindrops, like fragments of captured fire.

“Light fragments,” Evy breathed. She held the thimble aloft; its glow flickered in resonance with the golden ribbon curling from the journal.

Etain’s eyes widened. “Like the Lantern in Emberwood.”

The herbalist stiffened. “If you’ve seen it… time is shorter than I feared.”

Evy’s jaw tightened. She met each of her friends’ eyes. “We follow it. We fix the tear. And then…” She paused, letting the weight of the words hang. “…we find the Lantern again. And whatever it is that has been lost to us all.”

From somewhere far away, a voice like embers crackling over stone whispered through the rain:

*"Seek it when frost and fire meet."*

The four stepped into the wet morning, the golden trail stretching before them. Mud squelched beneath their boots, droplets clinging to cloaks and hair, but they did not falter. The air smelled of rain-soaked earth and magic, heavy with the sense of things yet unseen.

Unseen eyes seemed to watch them from the mist, and in the distance, the faint outline of a spire shimmered, just beyond reach. The Seamspire awaited—looming, mysterious, and dangerous. At its heart lay the oldest tear of all.

And somewhere beyond it, threads they had long thought lost began to hum in anticipation. Threads that might lead them not only to the lantern, not only

to the rifts in time… but to the parents they had never stopped searching for.

Evy's hand tightened around the thimble, its glow flaring like a heartbeat. "We follow," she whispered, more to herself than anyone else. "No matter what waits for us."

The trail of golden light stretched toward the horizon, bending through mist and shadow, carrying them into a journey that would test everything they believed—and everything they hoped to find.

## Epilogue – The Dawn Beyond the Seasons

The rain had cleared, leaving the world washed in pale morning light. Evy held the fully restored Thimble of Seasons in her hands, its silver glow steady

and warm. Around her, Kalliope, Elowen, and Etain watched as the last of the golden ribbon of light from the journal faded into the sky.

They had mended rifts, outwitted guardians, and faced shadows that tested not just their strength, but their trust in one another. The thimble's magic hummed quietly, as if content — for now.

Evy looked at her friends and smiled. "We did it. The seasons are whole again."

"Whole, yes," Elowen replied softly, "but there's still more out there. Something called the Seamspire… and the lantern."

Kalliope flexed his fingers, a grin tugging at his lips. "Then we'll chase it. Together."

Etain flipped through the journal one last time, noting the glowing page that had guided them. “Every answer leads to another question,” he murmured. “But at least we know the path isn’t impossible.”

A soft wind drifted through the herbalist’s cottage, carrying with it tiny motes of light. The four friends watched them dance — reminders of the fragments yet to be found, the adventures yet to come.

Evy tucked the thimble safely into her satchel. “We follow the light. We mend what we can. And we face whatever waits beyond the next horizon.”

Outside, the world stretched wide and uncertain, but bright with possibility. Somewhere far away, the Lantern of Pyrelight burned, waiting to be found again. And in the distance, the first whispers of a new journey

stirred, calling to the heirs of the three E's — and the one born from the broken vow.

The road ahead would be long, and danger would wait. But together, they had learned that no magic — not even a thimble — was more powerful than trust, courage, and friendship.

And so, with hearts full and resolve unshaken, they stepped forward, ready for whatever the next season of their lives would bring.

Far beyond the hills and forests they knew, a pale flame flickered in the darkness. The Lantern of Pyrelight awaited, hidden, its fire whispering of centuries-old secrets and dangers yet unseen. Somewhere, someone — or something — was watching. And the four friends

would soon discover that the next journey would test not only their magic and courage, but the very bonds that held them together.